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Silent partnership: The G-8's nonproliferation program

Insiders say that a major international collaboration to reduce proliferation threats is one of the most successful G-8 initiatives ever, yet its achievements have been ignored publicly and its future is uncertain.

BY ALAN J. HEYES & WYN Q. BOWEN

IN 2002, THE GROUP OF EIGHT (G-8) LAUNCHED THE GLOBAL Partnership against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. The partnership's budget was placed at $20 billion over 10 years, and it was supported by more than 20 nations and the European Union (EU).[1] Though it has had little public recognition, the partnership has been one of the G-8's most successful initiatives and has led to many benefits, including improved international security. Its future, however, remains undecided, as its funding is set to expire in less than two years. (This year, during Canada's G-8 presidency, policy makers will begin to determine the shape and direction of the partnership beyond 2012.)

So the time to assess the Global Partnership is now. In 2009 we conducted extensive interviews with some 35 individuals from around the world, all of whom had direct experience with the partnership and its projects. Interviewees included European Commission officials, representatives from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and contractors involved in delivering Global Partnership projects.[2] In addition, we spoke with diplomats, foreign ministry policy officials, program directors of national Global Partnership programs, and project managers from governments and the private sector. A number of interviewees were senior technical advisers who embrace nuclear safety, nonproliferation and security issues. Those providing input were from all of the G-8 countries, and they provided their candid views on the basis of anonymity. Our findings indicate that the partnership has aided security in the former Soviet Union and has the potential to continue to do the same on a broader geographic level. As such, it is a valuable tool, and the G-8 should take steps to renew its funding.

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The GP's mandate. The scope of the Global Partnership (GP) embraces a broad range of activities, including disarmament and enhancing the security of nuclear and radiological materials. But the initial geographic focus was on Russia and the other former Soviet states—specifically, destroying their chemical weapon stockpiles and dismantling old nuclear submarines.[3] And significant progress has been made in these areas. Most of Russia's decommissioned submarines, some of which contained spent nuclear fuel, are now dismantled, and nearly all of its chemical weapons are expected to be destroyed by 2012.

For perspective on the magnitude of these achievements, recall the situation in 2002: More than 100 nuclear submarines were waiting to be dismantled, and 40,000 metric tons of chemical weapon stocks awaited destruction; most of the GP donor countries had little or no experience working in Russia or the other former Soviet republics; and Moscow had little experience working directly with others on technically complex projects involving hazardous materials, in proximity to, and sometimes within, sensitive military areas. (The main exception was the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which was established in 1992; it still operates successfully across the former Soviet Union.)[4]

Yet despite this success, relatively little attention has been accorded to the GP by academics, the media, and the general public. Many individuals interviewed suggested that the GP countries themselves may be partially to blame for this lack of attention. Only a few of them have produced annual reports outlining their GP activities, and short progress statements and project lists have been buried in the documentation at each G-8 summit.[5]

Moreover, GP donor countries have paid comparatively little attention to evaluating the impact of their projects or to regularly publicizing partnership successes. The notable exceptions are Canada, Britain, and the United States; however, the latter's substantial GP activities are embraced by a range of different State Department, Defense Department, and Energy Department programs, and to the external observer are not readily seen as part of the partnership because Washington does not publish an annual compendium of its GP activities other than in the G-8 summit documents.

The Global Partnership Working Group—the international policy group that oversees the partnership—has conducted occasional reviews, but these have been superficial affairs devoid of detailed analysis and largely influenced by the need to reach a consensus among G-8 partners.[6] The working group has not agreed upon any central metrics to measure the realization of key objectives, and the absence of a standing bureaucracy, which results in a light-touch policy approach—arguably a key GP strength—also could be perceived as a weakness.

Many GP countries downplay their financial contributions to the partnership, perhaps because the GP's focus has been on Russia—a G-8 country getting richer by the day through its growing oil and gas industries and also aspiring to recover its former superpower status. The more mundane explanation may be that politicians in GP countries recognize the strong safety, security, and environmental merits of threat reduction in Russia without needing to draw attention to them. Indeed, it is striking that even though Britain's relations with Russia remain strained, its GP program of work in Russia continues mainly unaffected.[7]

Many of the officials we spoke with felt that of the range of international instruments available for undertaking nonproliferation, nuclear safety, and security projects, the GP is the only one that has the necessary long-term funding and flexibility to be effective.

GP achievements and advantages. Our interviews with individuals involved with the GP reveal that the partnership is perceived to have significant benefits. In particular, it is seen as one of the most important initiatives to come out of the G-8, and in the words of one official, it is "a unique mechanism for fostering international collaboration, enhancing coordination of projects, and sharing lessons learned." Interviewees from a number of the non-G-8 European countries felt that the mere presence of the GP had inspired them to do more work on threat reduction. According to an individual who worked for the European Commission, the partnership has been a "fantastic mechanism" to provide a picture of what others are doing on threat reduction, to share lessons learned, and to avoid duplication of effort.

Officials from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development commented that without the GP, there probably would not have been sufficient funds for the Northern Dimension Environmental Partnership, an initiative in northwestern Russia that coordinates efforts to tackle local environmental problems due in part to radioactive waste from Soviet-era nuclear submarines. Officials from many of the smaller GP-member European countries felt that without the partnership, they would not have been able to contribute to global threat reduction projects outside of their borders. Many of the officials we spoke with felt that of the range of international instruments available for undertaking nonproliferation, nuclear safety, and security projects, the GP is the only one that has the necessary long-term funding and flexibility to be effective. This flexibility is seen as vital to allow the international community to address emerging threats outside of Russia.

Some other advantages. **Improved international relations.** The GP has played a pivotal role in enhancing good working relations between the donor states and Russia and the other former Soviet countries at a nonpolitical level, according to individuals we interviewed. Russia in particular has benefitted greatly from access to international project and program management know-how, including technical expertise, which it is now starting to put into practice in its own projects. Many of those consulted, including policy makers in Russia, believe that the destruction of Moscow's chemical weapons and dismantlement of old Soviet submarines would have taken considerably longer were it not for the GP. At the same time, GP donor countries now better understand the challenges that former Soviet states face in dealing with their Cold War–legacy weapons and materials.

Environmental victories. A consistent message from the individuals interviewed was the belief that the general public could understand the benefits of the GP through the talismanic images of the destruction of chemical weapon shells and of metal from Russian nuclear submarines being recycled into washing machines. A significant environmental and nuclear safety threat was certainly associated with the submarines' spent nuclear fuel in the fragile Arctic environment.[8] Indeed, the removal of these submarines and their associated nuclear material represents a substantial environmental achievement—especially for Russia's neighbors. Environmental remediation was one of the main reasons for Norway's substantial GP support: Oslo welcomed the increased funding and technical assistance provided to Russia to remove the rotting submarines containing nuclear waste. Similar policy motivations were behind Japanese and Canadian support for the dismantlement of Russian submarines in the Pacific Far East.

Exchange of expertise. The GP has provided participant states with access to other states' expertise. As interviewees pointed out, such a sharing of specialized knowledge has minimized the risks of future projects, especially those dealing with spent fuel from nuclear submarines, which are both complex and hazardous. A number of British officials and contractors remarked that by undertaking projects involving the dismantlement of the Soviet nuclear fleet, Britain learned practical lessons on how to more efficiently dismantle its own decommissioned nuclear submarines. This knowledge will be indispensable in a couple of years: Britain will face 17 redundant submarines by 2012, and it has yet to dismantle a single one.

London also benefited from its participation in the Arctic Military Environmental Cooperation Agreement, in which GP funding enabled the Royal Navy and NATO to undertake joint projects with Russia to survey a sunken nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea and to transport damaged nuclear submarines via a commercial heavy lift vessel in partnership with Norway.[9] Now the Royal Navy's salvage experts have greatly reduced the environmental and safety risks inherent in moving fragile vessels to their dismantlement location, demonstrating that such freighting activity is both safe and commercially viable.

Learned expertise. Another benefit of the international community addressing well-defined problems (e.g., building facilities to destroy chemical weapons or dismantling submarines and securing their spent nuclear fuel) is that it provides participants with invaluable involvement working on problems in a different environment and outside of previous experiences. Establishing such projects is complex in terms of the necessary legal agreements, contractual and procurement issues, cultural and security challenges, and unfamiliar working environments. But through their experiences with projects in former Soviet states, most GP donors have learned substantial lessons that they can now apply to a range of future threat reduction projects around the globe, which will be useful if the partnership expands geographically. Cultural and legal frameworks will vary for projects in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—where future threat and risk reduction work is likely to take place—but the knowledge and confidence that the GP community has acquired through its work in Russia and the other former Soviet states will enable new projects in new locations to be implemented more quickly and with mitigated risks.

Although there was general agreement among GP states that Russia and the former Soviet states should be the focus of the first wave of projects, it also was widely accepted that the future scope should be much more international.

The value of "piggybacking"—in which one or more donors channel their funds through a lead donor responsible for managing projects on the group's behalf—is a specific lesson that a number of GP donor states have learned. According to many interviewees, piggybacking was an effective way for smaller donors to participate in the GP. Indeed, without it, several countries probably would have been prohibited from contributing, given the incumbent administrative, legal, and management burdens of running the projects. The U.S.-led Elimination of Weapon-Grade Plutonium Production Program and the British-led projects at the Shchuch'ye chemical weapons destruction facility in Russia are two examples of successfully piggybacked projects. For the former, the additional international funding helped leverage all the necessary remaining funding for the project from Congress; for the latter, the collaboration brought in additional expertise, reduced bureaucracy, and provided access to the Ministry of Defence's technical and project management expertise.

Opportunities lost. While the GP is widely seen as having produced many benefits, its ability to redirect efforts toward addressing emergent chemical, biological, or nuclear threats has been limited by the consensus nature of its framework. The result has been the GP's steady focus on completing the work on chemical weapons destruction and dismantling decommissioned submarines in the former Soviet Union.

This limited focus has meant that work on second-tier priorities identified at the partnership's founding—such as enhancing the security of nuclear, radiological, and biological materials outside of the former Soviet states—has received far less attention from most GP donors. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the U.S. Global Threat Reduction Initiative already support significant work in these areas together with a few projects funded by other GP donors, but the general failure of other states to effectively address the security of nuclear and radiological materials resulted in President Barack Obama's call for a Global Nuclear Security Summit. Scheduled for April, the U.S.-hosted summit is expected to encourage future international efforts to focus on ensuring that all such materials are secured within a four-year time frame. If it had been possible to tackle this issue in tandem with the start of the GP's work in 2002, the urgency for the Obama initiative might not have existed. Another second-tier priority also is receiving more attention: The new U.S. National Strategy for Countering Biological Threats has made biosecurity a primary issue, and Washington has allocated significant funding to biosecurity. Canada is also programming significantly to counter the biothreat, as are other GP donors such as Britain and the EU.

Improving and expanding the GP. Although there was general agreement among GP states that Russia and the former Soviet states should be the focus of the first wave of projects, it also was widely accepted that the future scope should be much more international. Under Japan's leadership, this was officially decided in 2008, and last year for the first time summit documents included information on projects outside of the former Soviet Union. Countries including the United States, Canada, and Britain initiated the work outside of Russia; many of these projects involved securing nuclear and radiological material, improving biosafety and biosecurity, and engaging scientists on a global level.

The renewed interest worldwide in nuclear energy also has highlighted the need to promote professional responsibility with regard to the handling of nuclear and radiological materials and proliferation-sensitive information. Addressing "knowledge proliferation" as part of nonproliferation objectives has recently been stressed by a number of officials; the GP Working Group made several related recommendations during the 2009 G-8 Summit in Italy.[10] Similarly, concerns about proliferation-sensitive, dual-use information associated with the biotech industry and emerging infectious diseases are beginning to shape a new key priority area for the GP.

The GP experience to date has demonstrated that proliferation threats are most effectively tackled through exactly the type of cooperative, multilateral partnerships on which the GP is based. In this respect, it makes eminent sense for the next stage of the GP, as it moves to address global challenges, to ensure that its activities are designed to enhance the values and objectives of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1540—the first resolution to address the role of non-state actors in WMD proliferation. GP countries that have strong legislative frameworks to prevent proliferation should be well placed to provide support in the context of Resolution 1540. Such an approach would be consistent with recommendations in a 2009 report from the Henry L. Stimson Center and the Stanley Foundation regarding the importance of leveraging the resources of the international community to meet nonproliferation objectives.[11]

A recurring motif in the conversations we had with individuals who carried out policy or fieldwork on GP projects was their general dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the GP Working Group, which many saw as insufficiently focused on longer-term strategic issues and failing to provide necessary guidance in priority areas.

A recurring motif in the conversations we had with individuals who carried out policy or fieldwork on GP projects was their general dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the GP Working Group, which many saw as insufficiently focused on longer-term strategic issues and failing to provide necessary guidance in priority areas. The GP's organization, which requires consensus, is not ideal in this respect, yet a more top-down approach might have prohibited donors from supporting work through a largely uncoordinated portfolio of projects in northwestern Russia on nuclear submarines and spent nuclear fuel—some of which, in hindsight, were not a top priority. In instances where guidance and effective coordination were eventually forthcoming, the effort was not initiated by the GP, but rather via groups such as the IAEA Contact Expert Group for work in northwestern Russia and the Shchuch'ye Chemical Weapons Coordination Group. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the international community eventually found an effective way to streamline coordination and to develop more effective working practices, and that this flexibility—underpinned by good working relations—is characteristic of the GP.

Many of the officials consulted felt that there have been too few real opportunities for GP countries outside of the G-8 to influence priorities, despite the significant sums of money and expertise that some have applied to GP projects. Related to this is the perception of a number of those consulted that the GP Working Group should have adopted a more active role in encouraging new donors to participate; there has been an absence of a coordinated plan to contact and lobby potential new participants. As the GP adopts a more global approach, the need to involve new partners with relevant experience and regional influence will be vital. For example, involving China—which has much expertise and influence in North and Southeast Asia and growing international relationships, including in Africa—could advance the GP's goals. This raises the question of whether the GP should widen its focus from the G-8 to the G-20. Some of the individuals we interviewed worried that widening the scope to the G-20 would limit the partnership's flexibility and add to the challenges of the current consensus-based approach. Others saw value in a G-20 focus because it would bring into the fold key South American, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian countries—both in terms of obtaining new funding sources and allowing GP projects in these regions to be fast-tracked.

Everyone interviewed was clear that any new entrants to the GP club should actively contribute funding and technical expertise. It seems eminently sensible to include in the GP all countries that can advance the partnership's goals and help establish projects and networks in priority regions and countries where an engagement strategy can enhance nonproliferation and move forward the objectives of Resolution 1540. A mechanism that establishes separate but networked steering groups (and their technical support frameworks) may overcome some of the concerns about reducing the flexibility of the GP.

Many of the individuals with whom we spoke believed that more could, and should, be done to promote the achievements of the GP and thereby raise its overall profile. Britain and Canada released annual reports on their GP activity that were valuable in explaining to domestic audiences the importance of the work. But there would have been much greater value in a report from the GP itself, outlining the achievements and lessons learned by all participants. At present, the working group's outreach consists of producing a few pages of consensus text and a spreadsheet of projects that does not even include all current projects. Obviously, a more thorough system is desirable. More comprehensive reporting—perhaps achieved by requiring all donors to prepare an annual statement of their work and then collating these into a single published report—also could encourage wider interest in the GP's work and attract new donors as the geographic scope widens.[12]

Decision time. Our extensive research and conversations with dozens of people involved with the Global Partnership indicate that the GP has been an exceptionally successful G-8 initiative (especially compared to others launched by the group) and that it could continue to play a vital role in addressing proliferation threats. Although its future projects will be smaller in scale and much more diffuse than those that characterized the GP's experiences in Russia, the international expertise gained from carrying out those programs will provide an invaluable foundation from which to tackle other threat reduction projects around the world. So the case must be made, on political and financial levels, for continuing the partnership's work beyond 2012; Canada—which now holds the G-8 presidency—will need to make a convincing argument (to its own taxpayers as well as other states) if the GP is to continue. A decision this year to continue the partnership is essential to avoid a hiatus in planning, given the long lead times needed to agree on budgets and establish networks and projects in new regions. ■

Alan J. Heyes OBE is a visiting senior research fellow at King's College London in the Centre for Science and Security Studies (CSSS) in the Department of War Studies. He is the former program director of Britain's Global Threat Reduction Program. Wyn Q. Bowen is professor of nonproliferation and international security at King's College London and director of CSSS. The research for this project was made possible with a generous grant from the MacArthur Foundation. The authors deeply appreciate the input of all those in the Global Partnership community whom they interviewed.

NOTES

1. Some of the Global Partnership's (GP) support from the European Union (EU) comes through the European Commission's Instrument for Stability, which was created in 2006 to provide the EU with a strategic tool to address global security challenges. A wide range of global threat reduction work supported by the Instrument for Stability is currently underway or planned, including projects on fighting chemical, biological, and nuclear trafficking; biosafety and biosecurity support; the retraining and alternative employment of former weapon scientists and engineers; and support for multilateral nuclear assurance initiatives. See Commission of the European Communities, "Instrument for Stability—Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2009–2011," April 8, 2009.

2. Our research represents the preliminary findings of a project that was funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Government officials and others interviewed agreed to give their candid comments with the approval of their organizations on the basis of anonymity because it was felt the evaluation process would be strengthened by such an approach. Additionally, many of those interviewed were senior officials actively involved in implementing GP activities—and currently in discussions on its future. Attributing specific adverse comments about the framework of the GP might prejudice those negotiations.

3. Details on the Global Partnership can be found on the Canadian government's G-8 website along with all key G-8 GP documents. Available at http:// www.inter-

national.gc.ca/gpp-ppm/media/index.aspx?lang=eng.

4. More on the individual programs and projects under U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction can be found at Defense Threat Reduction Agency's website. Available at http://www.dtra.mil/Missions/NunLugar/GlobalCooperationInitiative.aspx.

5. Since the GP's inception, only Britain and Canada have produced annual reports covering their work in the partnership. A few countries (e.g., France, Germany, and Norway) have issued ad hoc reports. Each G-8 presidency has produced a portfolio of GP and other nonproliferation-related documents; see, for example, the Canadian G-8 website. Available at http://www.international.gc.ca/gpp-ppm/media/index.aspx?lang=eng.

6. GP Working Group, "Global Partnership Review," G-8 Summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, 2007. Available at http://www.g-8.de/Content/EN/Artikel/__g8-summit/anlagen/gp-review-final,templateId=raw,property=publicationFile.pdf/gp-review-final.pdf.

7. Foreign Affairs Select Committee, "Foreign Affairs—Second Report: Global Security: Russia," November 2007. Available at http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmselect/cmfaff/51/5102.htm.

8. In our view, decommissioned nuclear submarines present no real proliferation or security threats, especially in comparison with highly enriched uranium used in poorly protected research reactor facilities. This raises the question of why the GP focused on dismantling submarines in the first place.

9. The agreement was set up in 1996 by the United States, Norway, and Russia as a cooperative program to address Cold War–legacy environmental issues in the Arctic. Britain joined in 2003 with the key objective of reducing threats from military activities, past and present. The United States and Norway now have assumed "observer status," and the program is essentially a British-Russian bilateral naval agreement.

10. GP Working Group, "Recommendations for a Coordinated Approach in the Field of Global Weapons of Mass Destruction Knowledge Proliferation and Scientist Engagement," G-8 Summit in La Aquila, Italy, 2009. Available at http://www.g8italia2009.it/static/G8_Allegato/Annex_B,2.pdf.

11. Brian Finlay and Elizabeth Turpen, "The Next 100 Project: Leveraging National Security Assistance to Meet Developing World Needs," Henry L. Stimson Center and Stanley Foundation, February 2009.

12. GP Working Group, "Report on the G-8 Global Partnership," G-8 Summit in Hokkaido-Toyako, Japan, 2008. Available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/summit/2008/doc/pdf/0708_12_en.pdf.

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